



# A Piece of my Mind

Editorial Comment

## Vaccinate, vaccinate, vaccinate

I have to admit it. I don't understand antivaxxers. The best cartoon I've seen recently has a child asking his mom why she had a scar on her upper arm and he didn't. If you're ancient, as I am, you'll remember that the smallpox vaccination left a small scar. In the cartoon, the mom's response was great – "Because the vaccine worked."

## The smallpox story

Why do people not remember that? (Are all antivaxxers too young to remember it?) If it didn't kill you, smallpox left people pock marked and maimed by a number of complications. It started off with symptoms that sound familiar – a fever, muscle pain, malaise and fatigue. (Ring any bells?) But its effects were serious and devastating. It was around for centuries – evidence was seen even in Egyptian mummies. That extremely valuable resource, Wikipedia (who is related to Dr Google), reckons that it killed about 300 million people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (And they actually do supply references that you can check.) (Yes, I checked. You knew I would.)

I found it fascinating that the Chinese apparently started immunising against smallpox in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The most important lesson to be learned from smallpox vaccination is that, if the entire world co-operates, you can actually eradicate a serious infection. From small beginnings in the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, all countries started to inoculate against smallpox.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was an internationally concerted effort to vaccinate people. The result? In 1980, the World Health Organization declared that smallpox had been eradicated. (The last natural case of smallpox occurred in 1978. There was however an "oops" in 2018, when a laboratory worker contracted smallpox.)

The moral of the story? A united effort to vaccinate leads to an amazing success story.

## And then there's polio ...

Funnily enough, polio victims also began with flu-like symptoms – sore throat, fever, tiredness, nausea, headache and stomach pain. Most people of my age can remember someone who was infected with polio.

In my case, I had two friends who had suffered from it. The first was a girl who had paralysis effects that impaired the use of her left arm and hand. Her major ambition was to climb Mount Kilimanjaro to prove that it could be done. I'm afraid that I lost touch with her after she moved to Israel, so I don't know if she ever achieved it.

Another friend was born right-handed. Polio forced her to become left-handed. Which seriously affected her handwriting! (But maybe, just maybe, she became more creative as a result of it?!)

In 1988, the World Health Organization adopted a resolution for the worldwide eradication of polio. In 1996, I was privileged to be working for the PSSA, and I was invited by the editor of the *SAPJ*, Rupert Watson, to attend the launch of the "Kick polio out of Africa" campaign. I'll never forget the sight of Nelson Mandela caringly, and carefully, administering a dose of the polio vaccine to an infant. What a joy to witness that!

Was the campaign successful? In August 2016, the last case of wild poliovirus was recorded in Africa. And eventually, on 25 August 2020, Africa was certified free from the disease.

The success of vaccination? Oh yeah. Don't argue. How CAN you argue?

## And what about measles?

In 1963, I had some life-changing experiences. Most important was that I moved from Durban to Johannesburg. (When a colleague at Wits accused me of having a Durban mentality, I took it as a compliment.) A week after we moved, my baby sister had a serious case of measles, and I caught it too. As an adolescent.

Years later, my young daughter caught it, but in a more serious way. Our doctor made daily house calls. Even in those days, this was rather unique, but it emphasised how seriously he took the risks.

There is a chilling statement on the World Health Organization's website: "Even though a safe and cost-effective vaccine is available, in 2018, there were more than 140 000 measles deaths globally, mostly among children under the age of five."

In 2017, there was an outbreak of measles in Tshwane. Investigations showed that most of it was due to one uninoculated family. Really? How can that happen in this day and age?

## The answer?

As pharmacists, we have the responsibility to ensure that our patients and their families understand the need for immunisation. Who knows? Maybe we can educate them well enough to make COVID-19 a thing of the past.

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